

FINDING COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION VALUES

Influential Californians Speak on the Purpose of Public Education



UCLA INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY,  **IDEA** EDUCATION, AND ACCESS

FINDING COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION VALUES
Influential Californians Speak on the Purpose of Public Education

By: John Rogers, Melanie Bertrand, Wendy Perez
January 2012
Copyright © 2012
UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access

UCLA IDEA 1041 Moore Hall, Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095
phone: (310) 206-8725 fax: (310) 206-8770 email: idea@ucla.edu

Support for this white paper was provided by: The James Irvine Foundation,
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and The Ford Foundation.

Recommended Citation Format:

Rogers, J., Bertrand, M., Perez, W. (2012). *Finding Common Ground in Education Values: Influential Californians Speak On The Purpose Of Public Education*.
Los Angeles: UCLA IDEA.

FINDING COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION VALUES

Influential Californians Speak on the Purpose of Public Education

We really need to come together and fix this. ... We just are fighting over the minutia and it doesn't make any sense. And we're making it much more difficult. In fact, it's not about us, it's about the kids. That's who we have to be worried about. ... It's the future of California.

– California legislator speaking about the state's public education system

For decades, California schools have been wracked by the pitched battles of lawmakers, educators, and communities over equitable education funding, school management, curriculum, and more. The statement, “It’s all about the kids,” is a worthy aspiration, but it has not necessarily guided the governance of the state’s school systems. Why is that and what can we do about it?

First, we need to recognize that thinking about students’ opportunities to learn is often muddled by other highly charged and often relevant interests—for example, workforce development, taxation, or the rights and status of public employee unions. Further, education policy “positions” are highly politicized, and thus polarized. Different parties and interest groups stake out positions to help clarify their differences with their opponents; often, these education positions remain at the highest level of abstraction. It is not surprising that groups and legislators try to align education policy with political “realities.” That’s a reasonable approach to legislating in a democracy. However, if we want to make schools more “about the kids” and not just lofty aspirations, we will need to realign political realities with what is demonstrably good and necessary for learning.

Second, we need to recognize that merely saying schools should be fixed is not enough. After the opening words are spoken, there is an unexplored territory of beliefs, values, and practices that need to be heard in order to break out of education policy gridlock. The exploration must be deep and sustained. General and abstract beliefs about education’s value (“preparing students with 21st century skills in a global economy,”) are not an adequate foundation for formulating coherent, equitable, and sufficient education policies. Such public conversations as exist concentrate on producing a more efficient and effective system rather than addressing the critical values-oriented questions, “efficient for what?” and “effective for whom?”

This white paper explores how influential Californians conceive of the purpose of public education. Our intention was to learn how the purposes converge and to uncover potential building blocks for a consensus that puts students at the center and rises above disparate beliefs and alliances. The paper draws on 50 interviews we conducted with a bipartisan group of legislators and legislative staff, as well as leaders from business, labor, and civic life. We

invited participants to share personal experiences of powerful learning from their youth, and identify what students should learn in California public schools in preparation for life beyond high school. Taken as a whole, the interviews point to several intriguing points of consensus across this diverse group of respondents. Democrats and Republicans, business leaders and labor leaders, policy insiders as well as equity advocates share a broad set of beliefs about teaching and learning. Points of difference tended to cut across conventional lines, except when we asked narrowly partisan questions. By foregrounding the purpose of education, the interviews suggest a different and more promising platform for advancing educational policy in California.

The white paper begins with a description of the methods for our study. We then report on how respondents conceive of powerful learning and what they identify as the critical knowledge, skills, and understanding every California student should develop. We go on to consider whether respondents believe California is promoting desired learning outcomes and providing equal learning opportunities for all students. We also report on respondents' views about whether California students should follow a common learning pathway or whether some students should be prepared for college and others for the world of work. Our conclusion addresses perceptions of the value of public education to the future of California.

The Purpose of Education Study

Researchers at UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access conducted this study to explore how influential Californians conceive of the purpose of public education. The study used a snowball sampling methodology to recruit interview participants. Initially we identified key staff working with Democratic and Republican legislators on education policy. We invited these staff members to participate in the study, promising confidentiality, and then asked them to recommend other Californians who influence their thinking on education. We prompted the staff members to provide names of leaders who fall into one or more of five categories: 1) legislators or state policymakers; 2) labor leaders; 3) business or industry leaders; 4) civic leaders and education equity advocates; and 5) education policy experts. We then requested interviews with any individuals who were recommended more than once by the legislative staff members and we asked these additional participants to recommend people who influenced their thinking. We continued this process until we had interviewed a total of 50 participants.

Our 50 participants span party lines and hold an array of positions. Five (three Democrats and two Republicans) are legislators and 12 (six Democrats and six Republicans) are legislative staff or hold other statewide policy positions. Eight participants represent business or industry associations, and seven are labor leaders. Six participants are civil rights lawyers or civic leaders whose organizations advocate for educational equity. Most of the remaining participants work for think tanks or serve as lobbyists. (Two of these lobbyists represent organizations focused specifically on career and technical education.) A final participant serves as superintendent of a large K-12 school district. Roughly two-thirds of the participants are men and three in four are white.

We conducted the 50 interviews between April 2010 and March 2011. Most interviews were done over the phone and lasted between 30-40 minutes. All were audio-recorded. The interviews followed a standardized interview protocol, which asked participants to discuss the following: a) a personal memory about a powerful learning experience; b) what knowledge and skills high school graduates should know and master, and whether California schools promote these; c) whether California schools provide equal learning opportunities; d) whether California schools should prepare all students for college. We prompted participants to talk about civic education and the idea of “21st century skills.” We also posed a set of scenarios of four fictional students with different academic and social backgrounds and asked participants to explain what knowledge and skills each student needed for the future.

What is Powerful Learning?

The 50 influential Californians in our study attended a wide variety of schools—public and private, traditional and experimental, rural and urban. Yet, their examples of memorable classroom lessons or learning experiences have a lot in common. The remembrances highlight three foundational school values: personalization, active engagement, and application in authentic settings.

Personalization: Most respondents remembered a teacher who addressed students’ personal and distinctive backgrounds, interests, and needs. One labor leader had moved from school to school as a child because her parents were migrant workers. She remembered a teacher who chose her to do a dramatic reading. That meant that “there was something about me personally that was recognized.” What mattered is that the teacher “noticed me; she noticed who I was; she noticed what I could do and what [I] could be.”

Respondents recalled teachers who attended to their interests and capabilities and thereby helped them grow as learners. For example, a policy expert remembered:

A third-grade teacher noticed that I was not terribly interested in reading the material that had been assigned and made a very thoughtful effort to find out what I was interested in. [She] provide[d] me with some materials which were in line with my interests, and it really turned the corner for me. I became much more interested in reading and read much more away from school than I had been before.

Personalization also takes the form of teachers who get to know their students so intimately that they can craft individual learning plans. One Democratic legislative staffer from a small farming community in the Central Valley with few college graduates recalled a teacher who pulled her aside and gave her a list of books to read over summer vacation. “I started reading things like *Jane Eyre* and *Scarlet Letter* that summer, and that was a huge turning-point for me. That was when the thought of going to college [emerged].” She recalled that, by focusing on her potential rather than her immediate interests, the teacher broadened and “stretch[ed] intellectually” who she was. The summer reading “was a way of opening up my world. … The books were about other parts of the world, other cultures, other periods of time.”

Active Engagement: A second learning theme is the value of active engagement that lets students become actors in their own learning rather than just objects of instruction. Many respondents recalled participating in project-based learning or simulations. For example, a Republican legislative staff member described how “one of my all-time favorite teachers” taught second-grade math by immersing students in a classroom economy. The teacher created a student-run bank, assigned students jobs selling candy or pens and pencils, and required students to use part of their earnings to pay rent for their desks. In addition to motivating 7-year-olds to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, the classroom economy provided young people with a “profound” and lasting “real-life lesson” about the social meaning of money.

Respondents often noted that learning in the context of projects tested them in ways that “just reading out of the textbook and memorizing the facts” did not. A representative from a business group recalled how his “fabulous U.S. history teacher” pushed his high school class toward deeper analysis by creating a mock trial in which the federal government was charged with violating the rights of American Indians. The businessman personally sided with the American Indians, but his teacher assigned him to be the lead attorney defending the government. This tension between beliefs and role responsibilities challenged him. The situation “caused me to be even more dedicated to the task of understanding the issues on both sides.”

Application in Authentic Settings: A third theme is learning in authentic contexts that entrust students with consequential tasks and responsibilities. One respondent highlighted the distinction between theoretical and applied learning by describing how he learned geometry. Although he cannot now remember even one of the “twenty-some odd theorems … we had to memorize” in math class, he regularly uses the geometry he learned in his shop class. “If you give me a framing square and tell me the length and pitch of a roof, I can construct the trusses.” An impressive example of applied learning came from a state official who participated in his school’s Future Farmers of America (FFA) club. Members of FFA judged livestock according to a common set of standards and then defended their assessments to industry experts. “To me that was absolutely the greatest skill ever taught to me in high school … the ability to think through a decision, and then justify that set of decisions in a way that made sense. … And you had to follow the bouncing ball right down the line and explain exactly what you had observed and the decisions you made.” Several respondents pointed to the advantages of placing students in “real-world” settings where they can apply lessons and develop a wide range of skills. Many spoke about the power of worksite internships in companies or nonprofit organizations.

What Knowledge, Skills, and Understanding Do You Value?

The Californians we interviewed want the state’s schools to develop knowledgeable and skilled young adults who are prepared for rigorous intellectual engagement, collaborative work, critical and creative thinking, and robust civic participation.

Knowledge and Skills: This last century has seen ongoing curricular battles between those arguing that schools should focus on developing basic skills and those wanting schools to

promote knowledge in the academic disciplines. Most respondents wanted both approaches simultaneously. “It’s a combination of skills and knowledge,” noted an equity advocate. Many respondents envisioned students developing basic skills through the academic disciplines. One Democratic legislator reasoned: “There is a basic body of skills, and I think the core curriculum is a very, very good way to begin.” Even as they argued for students to develop basic skills and understandings, most respondents referred to a wide variety of high-level academic capacities. The following is a fairly typical set of learning goals articulated by a representative of a business organization.

They should be proficient in a range of subject areas and skills, and they should include the ability to read and comprehend and express themselves, both verbally and in written form at an adult level. They should be able to understand mathematical concepts and operate arithmetically and mathematically as an adult, at an adult level. And they should ... have the knowledge of history and current events and culture to be able to engage in political and social and community affairs. So, I’d say those would be the minimum.

21st Century Skills: It has become increasingly commonplace for policymakers to frame educational goals as “21st century skills.” We invited respondents to define this term and assess whether “21st century skills” reflect important learning outcomes. Roughly a quarter of respondents expressed some frustration with the terminology of “21st century skills.” For some, the term is ill-defined: “What does that mean—fly in a jetpack?” Others argued that “21st century skills” are the same skills that students have needed for generations. But, the majority of respondents associated “21st century skills” with the capacity to adapt to rapid change created by emerging technology and its effects on the workplace. Many viewed “21st century skills” as the ability to learn from and with technology. A policymaker in a statewide position noted: “The soft-skill set is going to even become more important as we move forward, because the technology is divorcing us from some of the personal interaction.” Chief among these “soft skills” is the ability to communicate and work in teams. As a Republican legislator reasoned, “Collaborating with others is important, as very few of us work alone and even when we work alone, we have to interface with others.” These soft skills, the legislator added, were the primary skills he had looked for when hiring people in the private sector.

Critical Thinking: Most of our respondents underscored the value of critical thinking for California’s students. Yet different respondents conceived of critical thinking in diverse ways. Many contrasted critical thinking with rote memorization. “Probably the most important thing,” noted a Republican legislator, “is that we need to have students that have learned how to think critically [and can go beyond] taking tests and spitting out answers.” A number of respondents framed critical thinking as a set of analytic skills—the capacity to recognize patterns, synthesize and organize information, or compare and contrast key concepts. Also noted was the ability to use abstract concepts to address novel problems, to “make connections between knowledge and reality,” as one labor leader explained. More generally, some respondents associated critical thinking with an experimental approach to addressing problems. What all students need, argued one Democratic legislative staffer, is “an understanding of the scientific methods, ... that ability to articulate a problem and understand the steps that you go through to try to experiment, to resolve that.”

For some respondents, critical thinking signifies the ability to look beneath or beyond surface reality. It prompts students to question the source and quality of information they are using. A business leader argued that, in addition to learning “how to get information,” students should learn “how to be skeptical, to evaluate sources of information.” She went on to talk about “the importance of getting good information from multiple sources, … sifting through … things that are being told to you, and looking for the hidden persuaders.” This commitment to questioning is particularly important in a rapidly changing environment. As one equity advocate argued, students need to be “prepared to learn what is coming, because … we can’t imagine an uncertain … future.”

Civic Education: There was broad support from our respondents for civic education. All but one of the 50 people we interviewed affirmed the value of civic knowledge. A small number of respondents expressed some ambivalence about the role of schools in preparing students for civic participation. Three respondents reasoned that focusing on civic participation might distract schools from other learning goals and another respondent worried that schools might slip toward political indoctrination by readying students for engagement. Yet these few respondents were the exception to a broad consensus that California public schools should promote core understandings about American civic life, prepare students to vote, and instill a set of civic dispositions.

Many respondents called for students to develop an understanding of America’s distinctive political traditions and practices. For example, a Democratic legislative staffer called on public schools to “pass down our heritage … our history and culture.” Some differences arose in how schools should represent this history. One Republican legislative staffer noted: “As Americans we recognize that our civic history is one that [is] worth knowing, and … one to be proud of.” Yet, another Republican legislative staffer reasoned that it was important for schools to avoid “subjectivity” and present “a true and honest and robust history.” Beyond this tension between patriotism and objectivity, there was a good deal of consensus on what young people need to understand about how our civic institutions work. “They ought to know the basics of representative government,” noted one Democratic legislative staffer, including the responsibilities of the three branches of government and rights and obligations of citizens.

The skills that respondents associate with civic participation are closely aligned with capacities for critical thinking more generally. One lobbyist explained that voters should be able to “discern between different arguments … [and] deal with inputs and large amounts of information and media.” A Democratic legislative staffer highlighted the importance of “being able to listen to arguments … and understand enough about what’s going on to be able to make a thoughtful choice on important questions.” Beyond voting, young people need practice in leadership and collaborative decision-making to participate in community-based problem-solving. As a labor leader noted, “They need to be able to work in teams, to appreciate people’s differences.”

A number of respondents also pointed to the role of public schools in promoting a commitment to active civic engagement. “They ought to understand,” a Democratic legislative staffer argued, “that decisions are made by those who show up, so if you choose not to participate in the

democratic process then you don't really have much standing to complain about what goes on in it." In addition, many argued that schools should encourage young people to believe that they have a role in improving their communities. This belief requires both a sense of connectedness and a sense of agency. As one lobbyist reasoned: "Students who get a good education in civics understand that in America every one of us is empowered, and we actually can make a difference."

Are California Public Schools Promoting Broad Learning Outcomes?

The participants in our study share a common concern: California public schools are not emphasizing the knowledge, skills and understanding that they care about most. Forty-six of forty-eight respondents reported a discrepancy between their valued learning goals and the focus of California public schools.¹ Twenty-two respondents tempered their critique by saying that some schools do a better job of incorporating valued learning goals than others. Yet the overall assessment was that the state school system does not sufficiently attend to the broad purposes of public education.

The most commonly offered explanation for this critique is the state's test-based accountability system. A leader of a business group acknowledged that while the state's move to "high-stakes testing," was undertaken with "the right intention," it has "tended to reward ... a pretty narrow definition of the skills and knowledge." A Republican appointee to a statewide position argued more colorfully: "People say, 'Oh, we've raised the goal post, we've raised the bar.' We didn't raise the bar, we narrowed the goal post. All that matters is test scores." Some respondents expressed the view that standardized tests in math and English Language Arts may be useful sources of information as long as they are not attached to the current "high stakes." One policy expert reasoned, when "people are held accountable to a narrow set of expectations, it narrows" the focus of their work. Or, as a lobbyist for a powerful statewide organization bluntly concluded: "If it is not measured, it is not important."

Respondents generally expressed concern that schools do not address a broad range of knowledge and skills and give short shrift to problem solving and critical thinking. A policy expert worried both that some state standards receive little attention and that "other things that are not embodied in the standards, about curiosity and purposes and civic engagement, are not valued, and therefore they're not taught." As the focus of teaching has narrowed, schools are less able to promote desired outcomes. "Too many schools," noted a business leader, "do not do a good job of teaching students to be well-rounded." Nor do they prepare young people, argued a Democratic legislator, for "real participation for college/career [and] active participation in communities."

¹ Two of the 50 people we interviewed did not answer this question.

Should California Prepare All Students for College?

Our respondents diverged over whether California public schools should prepare all students for college. Their views on college fall into three categories, emphasizing equity, choice, or differentiation. The 20 respondents who emphasized equity held that public schools should prepare everyone for college. (Respondents in this group often noted that students should be equipped for both college *and* careers.) Nineteen respondents reasoned that public schools should support every student to pursue his or her postsecondary choice, even though, “objectively,” college might not be the best option for some students. A third group of nine respondents argued that public schools should prepare students for distinct futures, based on their interests and capacities.² Differences across these three groups speak to the struggles of respondents to balance hopefulness with a sense of realism. Can schools: a) provide sufficient support to promote success for all students? b) differentiate among students without falling into historical patterns of discrimination? c) integrate college and career preparation?

Equity: The respondents who wanted public schools to prepare all students for college are a diverse lot. Equity advocates and representatives of business organizations were most likely to voice this viewpoint. While more Democrats than Republicans ascribed to this stance, it was not a majority position for elected officials or staffers from either party. Nor was it a majority position among labor leaders.

Respondents asserted two principles to claim that all students should be prepared for college. The first principle is that all students deserve equal treatment. “I oppose a separate categorization of students who go to college and students who don’t,” reasoned a Democratic legislative staff member, because “California’s educational system should aim to provide the same access, the same opportunities for all pupils.” A business leader similarly noted that “all kids should be prepared for both college and careers,” because it is “really important not to perpetuate that distinction.” The second principle holds that, with enough time and support, all students have the capacity to access and succeed in college. “There’s no reason why all kids couldn’t be able to go to college. . . . I don’t believe that DNA is inferior,” reasoned a lobbyist with a statewide policy group. “There’s no reason,” he continued, “why in the lower grades we can’t start kids on a track to be successful in college or in the workplace.” A Democratic legislative staff member similarly argued that even students who are behind in their credits in middle school or high school can, “through the right kind of system and the right set of teachers . . . get back on track.” Several other respondents echoed the view that “students shouldn’t be locked into decisions and choices that they make when they are 15 and 16 years old that limit what they might want to do when they are 23.”

Choice: The second group of respondents was less sanguine about student capacity, but asserted the importance of leaving the choice of college to students and their families. This group included most legislators and legislative staff as well as a majority of lobbyists. Characterizing their views about students as “realistic,” several respondents acknowledged that many students

² Two of the 50 people we interviewed did not respond to this question.

do not have the capacity to succeed in college. This argument was sometimes framed in terms of students' inherent intelligence, as when a leader of a business organization said, "Given a bell-shaped curve, not all people are going to have the ability to go to college." A labor leader who similarly acknowledged that many students "don't have the capacity or the ability" to succeed in college-level math, also went on to add that this might be a failure of colleges to offer a broader and more relevant curriculum. But, even while holding to the belief that college is not for everyone, respondents in this group argued against schools sorting students into college and non-college pathways. "That's called tracking and we're losing too many people," concluded a business leader. What is important, argued respondents in this group, is that students are given options to make their own decisions. "I think it is about choice," noted one business leader. "I mean, aren't we free people to decide and choose what we need to be? It's about choice, and it needs to be an educated choice that needs to have opportunities."

Differentiation: The third group of respondents reasoned that, since not all students are capable of, interested in, or ready for college, schools should create differentiated pathways for college-bound and non-college-bound students. For this group of respondents, targeting appropriate supports to students is preferable to encouraging them to pursue a route that does not suit them. Republicans were more likely to hold this position than Democrats; a number of lobbyists also shared this view. However, this stance was not embraced by a majority of any category of respondents.

Respondents in this third group offered several explanations for why some students should not be prepared for college. A first argument was readiness. One lobbyist suggested, "Everybody is different developmentally." This lobbyist noted that, "In terms of temperament and maturity ... not every kid is at the same place at the same time." A second argument centered on different learning styles and capacities. "Some kids just don't test well," a Republican legislator reasoned. "School is not a good experience for them, but they learn with their hands." A third argument held that because students are different, whether developmentally or in terms of innate ability and interest, schools should target programs to students' particular needs. Some students, reasoned a Democratic legislative staff member, are good at things other than academics, so our schools need to provide "training or preparation for what that something else is." By identifying and teaching these non-academic skills, schools can, in the words of one labor leader, "redefine the gifts that some kids have that's not attached to college at all."

Respondents differed over whether California schools should prepare all students for college, in part because they held distinct understandings about what makes students different. All of our respondents acknowledged that some students perform better academically and are more engaged in academics than other students. Yet some respondents ascribe these differences to external context, others to psychological factors like interests or maturity, and still others to inherent and fixed abilities. For example, one business leader told us he is "an anti-tracker" because he believes that school structures (or external context) shape students' interests and abilities. Rejecting the claim that a struggling student is not "college material," he argued that perhaps this student simply "doesn't like the kind of school we delivered to him."

Respondents also held different views about the importance of a college degree for securing

meaningful work that pays a middle-class wage. One pointed to college as a “ticket to liberation and to hope,” but another said that there is more than “one true path to enlightenment and prosperity.” Some respondents emphasized linking academic instruction to the world of work and said that college preparation and career preparation demand the same knowledge, skills, and understanding. Others saw college-preparatory curriculum and career and technical education as separate domains.

Are California Public Schools Providing Equal Opportunities for Learning?

Almost all of the Californians in our study acknowledged that the state’s students experienced learning in unequal ways. Forty-six of forty-eight respondents reported that California schools *do not* provide the same opportunities for students to develop the knowledge, skills, and understanding that the respondents value.³ “Even within the political subdivision boundary of the school district,” noted a leader of an education reform organization, “you have wide disparities in the instructional program that’s being delivered to kids.” An equity advocate specified these differences as ranging “from the building to the level and preparation of the teachers … to the instructional materials, to the curriculum.” Many respondents also noted that factors outside the school, particularly economic inequality and poverty, influence learning.

Yet, while nearly everyone recognized inequality, there were important differences in how different respondents explained inequality. To some extent, these differences are related to partisan standing and/or position. Democrats, equity advocates, and labor leaders commonly explained unequal learning opportunities as the result of structural inequalities in the school finance system and the ability of more affluent communities to generate additional revenue. “Year after year,” commented one Democratic legislative staff member, the state has failed to create “a funding structure that would be equal for all.” Inequality is increased further in periods of state fiscal retrenchment, she continued, since only the most affluent districts have the financial wherewithal to “put a parcel tax on their ballot” and make up for “monies that are missing.” The capacity of affluent communities to raise private funds also contributes to inequality. A Democratic legislator representing both affluent and low-income communities noted that “parents in the wealthier districts contribute in addition to the taxpayer dollars that their school gets, and low-income neighborhoods don’t have that kind of marginal contribution to make.”

Republicans focused less attention on the finance system and more on regulations governing teacher placements. Arguing that teachers are the most important learning resource, several Republicans worried that, due to the influence of teacher unions, experienced teachers are unequally distributed within districts. A Republican legislative staff member reasoned: “We have schools where a large majority of the teachers are new, and when the school district is forced to lay off, because of the union’s seniority rules, the new teachers are moved … I will put a lot of this at the feet of the unions [which] have kind of stacked the deck against a lot of the communities.”

³ Two of the 50 people we interviewed did not answer this question.

Why Does Education Matter for California?

In this final section, we consider the relationship between a quality education system and California's future. The 50 influential Californians we interviewed underscored the idea that education is key to developing powerful young adults ready for active engagement in California communities and worksites. For example, a Democratic legislative staff member argued that the public education system should produce young adults with the knowledge and analytic skills to weigh in on public affairs. This means, among other things, being able to understand "ballot measures that have either social significance or scientific significance" and sift through arguments aired in popular media or presented directly by politicians. A lobbyist expressed a related interest in developing young adults capable of assessing the relative value of different financial options—for example, whether, and under what conditions, to take on debt. His primary concern lay in fostering intelligent, proactive consumers who refuse to "stumbl[e] around in the dark and allow people to exploit" them.

A superintendent of a large school district wanted young people who can use their skills to achieve success wherever they go. "I think everybody should be able to cross the stage with a high school diploma and be able to walk into higher education in our public system, or walk onto a job site or a technical trade school and be able to pick up the technical trade manual ... and be able to read the darn thing." The superintendent envisions a K-12 education system that promotes young adults who have the literacy, numeracy, and analytic skills necessary for ongoing learning. This focus on continued development also framed the central goal of one business leader: "Education should be more about helping cultivate that love of learning and the skills of learning, so that lifelong learning is real." We should care about forging such commitment, he argued, because it makes for stronger and more fulfilled adults. "We all have sort of a spiritual connection to the satisfaction of feeling ... that we've challenged ourselves and we've grown and deepened our understanding."

This white paper began with two related suggestions for improving California education, both inspired by the interviews of 50 influential Californians. Those interviews revealed different perspectives and opinions, but also showed firm trends of beliefs and values. First, leaders and persons of influence might realign the political realities of ideology and party in order to accommodate their shared, fundamental, educational values. Second, it will take sustained public engagement and dialogue to significantly improve California education. It's worth considering that today's 20th century adults have not necessarily mastered those vaunted "21st century skills" we hold up to our children: critical thinking, working with others, compromise, flexibility, using technology for data-based decisions, and so forth. We need all Californians to ask tough questions, analyze data, and listen to the reasoning behind the answers.

Notes:

AFTERWORD: Reclaiming the Value of 500,000 Acres

There is a precedent for Californians joining together to hold consequential conversations about the purpose of education. In the fall of 1849, 49 influential Californians gathered in Monterey to draft the state's constitution.

Some delegates proposed that the legislature should be allowed to redirect funds otherwise meant for education toward other purposes. Winfield Sherwood, a lawyer from Sacramento, argued that the 500,000 acres of public lands that the federal government had granted to California to support public education might include gold mines and hence potentially produce more revenue than would be needed for schools. Why not, he and others suggested, allow proceeds from these lands to be used for other services or to limit the need for future taxation.

Several delegates rose in response to Mr. Sherwood. Jacob David Hoppe, a newspaperman from San Jose, suggested that free, quality public schools could make California "one of the most desirable States in the Union," thereby ensuring the state's future growth. Dr. Robert Semple of Benicia argued that education "is the foundation of republican institutions; the school system suits the genius and spirit of our form of government." Morton McCarver, a farmer from Sacramento, added: "Nothing will have a greater tendency to secure prosperity to the State, stability in our institutions, and an enlightened state of society, than by providing for the education of our posterity." The delegates ultimately voted 18 to 17 to strike Mr. Sherwood's proviso and maintain all 500,000 acres of public land to support a system of common schools.

That system of common schools continues to this day. It is up to all Californians to sustain it, and realize its potential.



FINDING COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION VALUES

Influential Californians Speak on the Purpose of Public Education

Contributing Researchers

John Rogers
Melanie Bertrand
Wendy Perez
Marisa Saunders
Julie Flapan
Sophie Fanelli
Gary Blasi

Contributing Editors

Martin Lipton
Carolyn Castelli
Claudia Bustamante

Design and Production

Nery Orellana



UCLA IDEA is a research institute seeking to understand and challenge pervasive racial and social class inequalities in education. In addition to conducting independent research and policy analysis, IDEA supports educators, public officials, advocates, community activists, and young people as they design, conduct, and use research to make high-quality public schools and successful college participation routine occurrences in all communities. IDEA also studies how research combines with strategic communications and public engagement to promote widespread participation in civic life. www.ucla-idea.org

For further information, contact UCLA IDEA
1041 Moore Hall, Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095
phone: (310) 206-8725; fax: (310) 206-8770; email: idea@ucla.edu